

Intro:

The Art of Living is a book that explains the teachings of buddhism from the 14th Dalai Lama. 'A Guide to Contentment, Joy and Fulfillment' says the sub-title. Which it indeed is. It talks about how to approach many topics like death, love, attachment from a Buddhist standpoint, It also covers an inside view of Buddhist spiritual lifestyle, and some experiences of Tibet, Nepal.

The origin story:

This book was authored by the 14th Dalai Lama. While the Dalai Lama needs no introduction, it's important to note that this book was translated by Thupten Jinpa, a Tibetan Buddhist scholar, former monk and an academic in religion and philosophy. He has been the principal English translator to the Dalai Lama since 1985. This book also contains illustrations from Tibet, Nepal and Buddhist lifestyle photographer Ian Cumming.

How it crossed my path:

My mama is an avid reader. He has thousands of books. He'd got a wood and glass cupboard made in our grandparents' place in Pune especially to store half of his books. I loved that cupboard in childhood, because it had soooo many books I'd not read. It was a mini-library for me. As a heavy fiction reader, I read less non-fiction in general. But when I saw a pocket-sized book, 'The art of Living' about the teachings of the Dalai Lama, I decided to read it.

Feeling the feels:

It's been more than a decade since I first read this book and I still remember lessons on death, attachment v/s love, that I'd read as a kid. They say the books you read tend to become a part of you even when you don't remember them. When I reflect on my life, I do believe a lot of these learnings are already a core part of my lifestyle.

This book had made me feel peaceful, calm and happy just by reading it. I also learnt about life, spirituality, human emotions, common reasons behind suffering and obstacles, why people in general stay unhappy. It showed me how changing the way you look at these things can transform our minds and life and make us happier. I do believe this book had a tremendous impact on my life that I'm really grateful for.

Few excerpts that created the biggest impressions on me:**1.**

The issue of facing death in a peaceful manner is a very difficult one. According to common sense, there seems to be two ways of dealing with the problem and the suffering. The first is simply to try to avoid the problem, to put it out of your mind, even though the reality of that problem is still there and it is not minimized.

Another way of dealing with this issue is to look directly at the problem and analyze it, make it familiar to you and make it clear that it is a part of all our lives.....

....Now, I want to speak about death. Death is a part of all our lives. Whether we like it or not, it is bound to happen. Instead of avoiding thinking about it, it is better to understand its meaning. On the news, we often see murders and death, but some people seem to think that death happens only to others, not to themselves. That kind of attitude is wrong. We all have the same body, the same human flesh, and therefore we will all die.....

....As death becomes something familiar to you, as you have some knowledge of its processes and can recognize its external and internal indications, you are prepared for it. According to my own experience, I still have no confidence that at the moment of death I will really implement all these practices for which I have prepared. I have no guarantee!

However, sometimes when I think about death I get some kind of excitement. Instead of fear, I have a feeling of curiosity and this makes it much easier for me to accept death. I wonder to what extent I can implement these practices. Of course, my only burden if I die today is, "Oh, what will happen to Tibet? What about Tibetan culture? What about the 6 million Tibetan people's rights?" This is my main concern. Otherwise, I feel almost no fear of death. Perhaps, I have some kind of blind confidence. So it is good to reduce the fear of death. In my daily practice of prayer, I visualize eight different deity yogas and eight different deaths. Perhaps when it comes all my preparation may fail. I hope not!

2.

The Buddhist interpretation is that genuine compassion is based on a clear acceptance or recognition that others, like oneself, want happiness and have the right to overcome suffering. On that basis one develops some kind of concern about the welfare of others, irrespective of one's attitude to oneself. That is compassion.

Your love and compassion toward your friends is in many cases actually attachment. This feeling is not based on the realization that all beings have an equal right to be happy and to overcome suffering. Instead, it is based on the idea that something is "mine", "my friend", or something good for "me". That is attachment. Thus, when that person's attitude towards you changes, your feeling of closeness immediately disappears.

With the other way, you develop some kind of concern, irrespective of the other person's attitude to you, simply because that person is a fellow human being and has every right to overcome suffering. Whether that person remains neutral to you or even becomes your enemy, your concern should remain because of his or her right. That is the main difference. Genuine compassion is much healthier; it is unbiased, and it is based on reason. By contrast, attachment is narrow-minded and biased.

Actually, genuine compassion and attachment are contradictory. According to Buddhist practice, to develop genuine compassion you must first practice the meditation of equalization and equanimity, detaching oneself from those people who are very close to me. Then, you must remove negative feelings toward your enemies. All sentient beings should be looked on as

equal. On that basis, you can gradually develop genuine compassion for all of them. It must be said that genuine compassion is not like pity or a feeling that others are somehow lower than yourself. Rather, with genuine compassion you view others as more important than yourself.

3.

Moreover, as material development reaches a higher and higher stage, we sometimes find that it brings with it certain complications, including more problems and challenges for us. Because of this fact, I think that all the major religious traditions of the world have the potential to contribute to the benefit and well-being of humanity, and also that they retain their relevance in the Modern Age.

However, since many of these major world religions evolved a long time ago in human history, I am quite sure that many aspects of their religious teachings and traditions reflect the needs and concerns of different times and cultures. Therefore, I think it is quite important to be able to make a distinction between what I call the “core” and “essence” of religious teachings and the cultural aspects of the particular tradition.

What I would call the “essence” or “core” of religious traditions are the basic religious messages, such as the principles of love, compassion, and so forth, which always retain their relevance and importance irrespective of time and circumstances. But as time changes, the cultural context changes, and I think it is important for the followers of religious traditions to be able to make the necessary changes that would reflect the particular concerns of their time and culture.

I think the most important task of any religious practitioner is to examine oneself within one's own mind and try to transform one's body, speech, and mind, and act according to the teachings and principles of the religious tradition that one is following. This is very important. Conversely, if one's faith or practice of religion remains only at the intellectual level of knowledge, such as being familiar with certain doctrines without translating them into one's behavior or conduct, then I think that is a grave mistake. In fact, if someone possesses certain intellectual knowledge of religious traditions or teachings, yet his or her consciousness and mental continuum remain totally uninfluenced by it, then this could be quite destructive. It could lead to a situation in which the person, because of having the knowledge of the religious beliefs, could use the religion for the purposes of exploitation and manipulation. So, I think, as practitioners, our first responsibility is to watch ourselves.

Parting thoughts:

Dear reader, I'm reminded of the hours I spent as a kid, reflecting on this book, as I sat on a small, yet sturdy wooden swing that my grandfather had installed in their home. Even now, as I write this review and recap the parts that I'd loved, I'm sitting for hours on my bed, relearning and pondering the same paragraphs with a small, happy smile on my face.